

An Address to the American Legion's 2020 Department of New York Convention
Written by Victor Gelfuso - 2020 Oratorical Contest NY State Champion

Pride and Gratitude

Distinguished members of the New York American Legion,

I wish that I were able to deliver these words to you face-to-face, but circumstances have decided that it must be otherwise. I hope that my remarks to you carry as much sincerity through pen as they would have in person.

As I approach the conclusion of my high school career, I have reached a reflective point in my life that has allowed me to appreciate all the blessings of my years; among many of which are the privileges I have received by being born in America and the opportunities I have been given by the service of all of you through the American Legion.

I would like to express to you my pride in being an American and my gratitude to all of you for your dedication to our country, both through military service and the generous programs offered by the American Legion.

My past two years have been filled with valuable experiences. I have delivered speeches at political dinners and parades; I have written in the pages of newspapers across Upstate New York; I personally know members of our government; and I will soon be starting my higher education at one of the finest colleges in the Empire State.

I say none of this with pride in myself, however. I share my personal story with you as evidence that America truly is the land of opportunity, and that in the United States, there is no limit to achievement with hard work and dedication. My accomplishments are also a testimony to the tremendous success of the American Legion's Americanism programs because all of my

adventures first began when I entered the Constitution Oratorical Contest for the first time at the beginning of my eleventh-grade year. That was the first time that I had ever participated in any kind of speech competition, and I was surprised to have reached the State Championship and placed fifth for my first year. My performance in my first year of the Oratorical Contest led to other speaking engagements at political events and ceremonies for Memorial Day and Veterans Day. I was amazed that so many people enjoyed listening to my ideas. This motivated me to begin writing to newspapers, and now my opinion articles have appeared in five different newspapers across the state. This experience with writing and speaking left me well-prepared for this year's Oratorical Contest. I wrote a new speech in which I discussed how our Constitution reflects that America is a nation founded on principle and goodness: The principles that all people are created equally by God with inalienable natural rights and that each citizen has a duty to serve their countrymen for the common good of the nation.

I had not expected to win this year, and becoming State Champion was a very pleasant surprise. With the generous scholarship awards from the past two years, I will begin attending Siena College in the fall.

To me, it is amazing that an everyday high-schooler in a small rural New York town has gotten to experience all that I have. The success that I have had makes me even more grateful to live in America.

The Oratorical Contest has also fostered a greater appreciation in me for the First Amendment to our Constitution. Exercising my rights to freedom of speech and freedom of the press has shown me how much the United States values one of the paramount rights in human life: the freedom of thought and the pursuit of truth.

But more than all of this, the most valuable thing that I have received from my time with the American Legion is what I have learned. In the past two years of the Oratorical Contest, I have met so many amazing veterans and their families. These experiences have taught me the character of the American soldier. The American soldier is a citizen who lives a life of service, sacrifice, and conviction in the American cause. I learned that many American soldiers continue to serve their country long after their time in the military is over through organizations like the American Legion. Meeting these veterans has taught me how important is the duty of every citizen to pass on the principles that our soldiers risked their lives, and even gave their lives, to protect and preserve. These are friendships that I hope to carry on throughout the course of my life.

My words to you are proof that the American Legion's Americanism programs make an immense impact on America's youth. Programs like the Oratorical Contest, Boys' State, and Girls' State are crucial in our time when more and more of our young people do not know the words of our Constitution and Declaration of Independence, nor the advice and admonitions of our Founding Fathers, nor the duties of American citizenship. Even the philosophical and theological foundations that America's history was built upon appear to be fading from the minds of our youngest generations of Americans.

President Ronald Reagan once said that: "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We did not pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it once was like in the United States where men were free."

An ancient Greek proverb says that “Society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.” The American Legion’s Americanism programs plant the seeds of patriotism in the hearts of our next generations, and although these seeds may not bear fruit until many years down the road, you will have the thanks of all our ancestors who came before us and our posterity who follows after us for carrying on the torch of liberty that has been handed down through America’s centuries.

Thank you to the Department of New York American Legion, Zone 4, District 6, and Hugick-Purcell-Shepard Post 616 for these experiences that I will cherish for the rest of my life. May God bless all of you and the country that you have served so well. I hope that we will meet again in the future.

- Victor Gelfuso
Richfield Springs, NY